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(54) Switch assembly mounted in a steering wheel

(57) A switch assembly (26D) has a switch cap (130) engageable with an airbag cover (24). A switch connector (133) has an extension portion (139) made from an electrically conductive material. A switch base (136) has a switch base engagement member (140) for securing the switch base to a steering wheel hub (12) and a con-

tour portion (138) extending in an opposite direction from the switch base engagement member. The switch base has a first conductor (134) insulated from a second conductor (135). A biasing member (132) biases the switch cap (130) from the switch connector (133) and the biasing member is disposed between the switch cap and the switch connector.

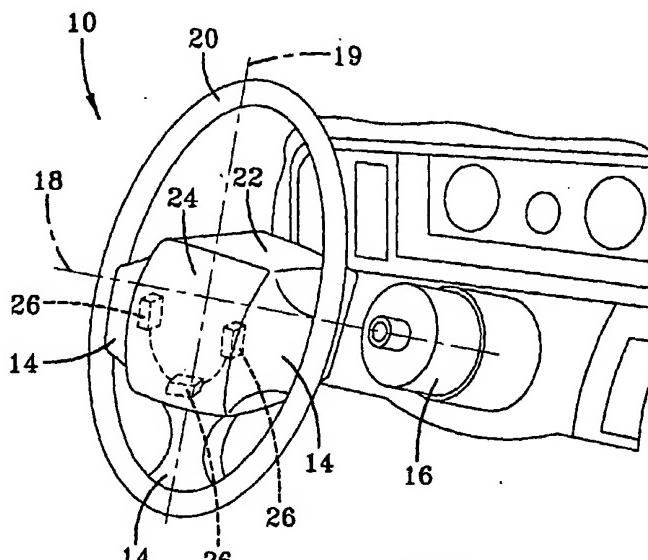


FIG-1

Description

[0001] The present invention relates to horn switch assembly for use with an airbag module.

[0002] It is well known to provide an airbag module in a vehicle in such locations as a steering wheel, a dashboard, a seat, a door panel or other locations. A typical airbag module includes an airbag inflator positioned adjacent an airbag to discharge a gas to inflate the airbag upon sensing certain predetermined vehicle conditions.

[0003] The airbag module is commonly formed as a separate and independent unit from the vehicle. The airbag module must be easily installed yet difficult to remove by an unauthorized person. Attachment of the airbag module is further complicated by the requirement that a horn actuator be mounted to the steering wheel assembly. Typically, the horn is triggered by pressure applied to a portion of an airbag cover.

[0004] In one known arrangement, the airbag module is rigidly anchored to a base plate within a cavity formed by the molded armature of the steering wheel assembly. A thin film actuator to activate a vehicle horn is located between the airbag module and an airbag cover. Pressure applied to the airbag cover triggers the thin film actuator to selectively activate the horn. However, mounting of the airbag module is typically with threaded fasteners, which may complicate assembly and disassembly. As the thin film actuator is mounted below the airbag cover and above the airbag module, replacement of the actuator may be complicated should the thin film actuator fail.

[0005] In another known arrangement, a switch assembly is mounted to a base plate within a cavity formed by the molded armature. The airbag module is then mounted to the switch assembly, such that pressure applied to the airbag module moves the entire module and triggers the switch to activate the horn. The switch assembly must be particularly robust to support the airbag module yet be able to restrain the airbag module during airbag actuation. Disadvantageously, the robust design of the switch assembly results in a complicated and expensive switch assembly. A driver must apply a relatively large amount of pressure to move the airbag module and trigger the switch.

[0006] Moreover, as the switch is located under the airbag module, enough clearance must be provided to allow movement of the airbag module relative to the molded armature. Commonly, this results in a noticeable separation line or gap between the airbag module and the steering wheel assembly. The separation line may be aesthetically unacceptable and may allow foreign objects to find their way between the airbag module and the steering wheel assembly. The separation line may be exaggerated by tolerance differences between the steering wheel assembly, airbag module and biasing member within the switch assembly.

[0007] Accordingly, it is desirable to provide an uncomplicated airbag mounting arrangement, which pro-

vides effective airbag module attachment. The attachment should also allow convenient horn activation with minimal pressure. It is further desirable to minimize the separation line between the airbag module and the steering wheel assembly to provide an aesthetically pleasing steering wheel assembly.

[0008] The foregoing problems are addressed in a switch assembly according to the attached claim 1.

[0009] The features of the present invention may be better understood by reference to the following description of the specific embodiments taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings.

15 Figure 1 is a perspective view of a vehicle steering wheel assembly installed in a vehicle.

Figure 2 is a partial sectional exploded view of a molded armature and steering column.

20 Figure 2A is a top view of a steering wheel armature illustrating a multiple of hook engagement members located at 3, 6 and 9 o'clock positions.

Figure 3 is an exploded view of a steering wheel assembly according to the present invention.

Figure 3A is a bottom view of an airbag module illustrated in Figure 3.

25 Figure 3B is a perspective view of the steering wheel armature illustrating a multiple of hook engagement members.

Figure 3C is an exploded top view of the steering wheel assembly.

30 Figure 3D is a perspective of an airbag housing illustrated in Figure 3 showing multiple engagement members for fastening the airbag housing to the molded armature.

35 Figure 3E is a perspective view of the airbag housing illustrated in Figure 3 D attached to the steering wheel armature shown in Figure 3B.

Figure 4 is a partial sectional view illustrating a switch assembly according to the present invention.

40 Figure 5A is a perspective view illustrating a step of mounting the airbag module to the steering wheel armature.

Figure 5B is a sectional view from the 6 o'clock position of a steering wheel assembly showing the airbag module mounted to the steering wheel armature.

45 Figure 6 is a bottom view of the steering wheel armature illustrating disassembly apertures and also disassembly tool.

Figure 6A is a sectional view at the 3'oclock position illustrating the disassembly aperture of Figure 6 and engagement members accessed thereby.

Figure 6B is a bottom view illustrating a step of disassembling the airbag module from the molded armature.

55 Figure 7 is an exploded view illustrated another switch assembly having metal wires.

Figure 7A is a side view of the switch assembly in Figure 7 in a non-engaged position.

Figure 7B is a side view of the switch assembly in Figure 7 in an engaged position.

[0010] Figure 1 illustrates a vehicle steering wheel assembly 10 positioned next to the steering column 16. The steering wheel assembly 10 includes a central hub portion 12 (Figure 2A) with outwardly extending spokes 14. The hub portion has an axis 18 substantially perpendicular to the hub portion and coaxial to the steering column 16. An essentially circular rim 20 is connected to the hub portion 12 by the spokes 14. The spokes 14 are preferably arranged from the central hub portion to the rim at 90, 180 and 270-degree positions. In other words, the spokes 14 are arranged at 3, 6, and 9 o'clock positions where 12 o'clock is the top of the rim 20 when viewed from the driver's position. The steering wheel assembly 10 could have any number of spokes and the spokes could be arranged in different positions.

[0011] In Figure 2 the steering wheel assembly 10 includes a metallic steering wheel armature 30, which is overmolded with a non-metallic material 32 such as polyurethane material or the like to form what is referred to as a "molded armature". The hub portion 12 is preferably secured to the steering column 16 by a threaded fastener 34 such as a bolt. The fastener 34 engages corresponding threads 36 within the steering column 16. Other fastening arrangements are suitable for the present invention. The non-metallic material 32 defines the essentially circular rim 20 and spokes 14 about the hub portion 12 and forms a cavity 38 to receive the airbag module 22.

[0012] Figure 3 is an exploded view of the steering wheel assembly 10. The airbag module 22 is mountable within the cavity 38 and concealed by the airbag cover 24. When a driver exerts pressure on the airbag cover 24 at least one switch assembly 26 is closed. Each switch assembly 26 activates a horn (not shown) in a known manner. As the switch assemblies 26 are preferably located proximate the airbag cover 24, minimum pressure is required to activate the horn. Although a particular steering wheel assembly 10 having a particular spoke hub and rim design is illustrated other steering wheel assemblies would benefit from the present invention.

[0013] In Figure 3 the airbag cover 24 includes attachment members 40 that engage an airbag housing 21. The attachment members 40 include apertures 42, which receive corresponding tabs 44 (Figure 3D) extending from the airbag housing 21. The airbag cover 24 can be attached the airbag housing by other arrangements. An inflator 46 is located within the cavity 38 and provides inflation gas to an airbag 48 during a crash. An electrical connector 50 (Figure 3A) extends from the inflator 46 and is connectable to an airbag firing circuit (illustrated schematically at 51).

[0014] Airbag module engagement members 52 (illustrated in Figure 3D) extend from the airbag housing 21. Armature engagement members 54 (illustrated in

Figure 3B) corresponding to the airbag module engagement members 52 extend from the hub portion 12 of the armature. Preferably, the airbag module engagement members 52 and the armature engagement members 54 are substantially hook shaped members (Figure 3). The airbag module 22 rests on the switch assemblies 26 while engagement members 52, 54 are normally separated by a clearance C (Figure 3E) and are only in contact, if the airbag 48 is deployed.

[0015] In Figure 3A the airbag cover 24 includes a plurality of switch assembly receivers 56. The receivers 56 each include an airbag cover engagement member 58 such as a substantially hook shaped engagement member to engage the switch assemblies 26 (Figure 4).

[0016] In Figure 3C the switch assemblies 26 are preferably located proximate each spoke 14 and support the airbag cover 24. The switch assemblies 26 are mounted within apertures 60 formed within the molded armature 32. The airbag cover 24 is mounted to the airbag module 22 and is mounted in a close fitting relationship with the molded armature 32. The switch assemblies 26 directly engage the airbag cover 24 receivers 56 (Figure 3A) that are located proximate the spokes 14. The component tolerance stack up is thereby minimized. An aesthetically pleasing fit between the airbag cover 24 and the molded armature 32 is provided which minimizes any separation line while allowing horn activation by movement of the airbag cover 24 relative to the molded armature 32.

[0017] In Figure 4 one embodiment of a switch assembly 26 is illustrated in a mounted position. The switch assembly includes a first switch portion 62 movable relative to a second switch portion 64. The first switch portion 62 includes a first switch engagement member 66 preferably including a substantially hook shaped member which engages the switch assembly receiver 56 having corresponding engagement members 58. The airbag module 22 is snapped onto the first switch portion 62. Other mounting arrangements may alternatively or additionally be provided.

[0018] The second switch portion 64 includes engagement members 70, which fit within the apertures 60 formed in the molded armature 32. The second switch engagement member 70 is preferably of a substantially cylindrical design having a ramped locking shoulder 72, which is engageable with a shoulder 74 formed by an enlarged diameter 76 within the aperture 60. The switch assembly 26 is also preferably snapped into the armature 32.

[0019] A biasing member 78 mounted between the first switch portion 62 and the second switch portion 64 biases the first switch portion 62 relative to the second switch portion 64. In the embodiment of Figure 4, the biasing member 78 is a coil spring which forces (illustrated as double headed arrow F) the first switch portion 62 away from the second switch portion 64. The switch assemblies 26 support the airbag cover 24 and the airbag module 22.

[0020] The first switch portion 62 includes a first hook 80 and the second switch portion 64 includes a second hook 82. The hooks 80,82 interact under the force of the biasing member 78 to limit movement of the first switch portion 62 relative to the second switch portion 64. Although the hooks 80,82 are illustrated as corresponding hook shaped members in the disclosed embodiment. Other hooks which limit relative movement of the switch portions 62,64 may additionally or alternatively be provided.

[0021] A first contact 84 mounted to the first switch portion 62 is thereby movable relative to a second contact 86 mounted on the second switch portion 64. By pressing on the airbag cover 24, the first switch portion 62 is moved in the direction of arrow H toward the second switch portion 64 such that the first contact 84 will touch the second contact 86. A circuit (illustrated by electrical connectors 88a and 88b) is closed and the horn 28 is activated.

[0022] A method for installing the above mentioned airbag module 22 within a molded armature 32 will now be described. The use of a steering wheel is for illustrative purposes only, and that the methodology of the present invention may be applied to other components.

[0023] In Figure 5A the molded armature 32 is secured to the steering column 16 by the threaded fastener 34 (Figure 2). The switch assemblies 26 are then mounted within the apertures 60 formed within the armature 32. The switch assemblies 26 preferably snapped into place (Figure 2A). A wiring harness 88A, 88B for the horn is then connected to the switch assemblies 26.

[0024] In Figure 5A the airbag cover 24 has been previously attached to the airbag housing 21 with the attachment member 40 to form the airbag module 22. The electrical connector 50 of the inflator 46 is connected to the airbag firing circuit 51 (also illustrated in Figure 3A). The airbag module 22 is then located within the cavity 38 of the molded armature.

[0025] Preferably, the airbag module engagement member 52' located at the 6 o'clock position is first aligned with the armature engagement member 54' located at the 6 o'clock position (Figure 3E). The airbag module 22 is tipped toward the armature engagement member 54', preferably at approximately 10 degrees below axis 19 (Figure 1). The axis 19 is perpendicular to the axis 18. The airbag module engagement member 52' is engaged with the corresponding armature engagement member 54' and the switch assembly 26 located at the 6 o'clock position is aligned with the switch assembly receiver 56 within the airbag cover 24 (Figure 3E). The airbag module 22 is then tipped toward axis 19 such that all of the first switch engagement members 66 are aligned with their corresponding airbag cover engagement members 58.

[0026] The assembler then presses against on the airbag cover 24 proximate the spokes 14 within the airbag cover 24 until each first switch engagement member 66 engages their corresponding airbag cover engagement

members 58 within the airbag cover 24. The armature engagement members 54 and the airbag module engagement members 52 are also engaged at this time. The airbag module 22 is snapped onto the switch assemblies 26 that have been previously snapped into the molded armature 32. An uncomplicated yet secure attachment arrangement is thereby provided by the present invention.

[0027] In Figure 5B a clearance C is formed between each armature engagement member 54 and the corresponding airbag module engagement member 52 when the module 22 is mounted to the molded armature 32. The module 22 rests on the switch assembly 26. Preferably, the clearance C is approximately 1 mm. The clearance C assures that there is normally no interference between each armature engagement member 54 and the corresponding airbag module engagement members 52 that may result in undesirable noise and/or vibration.

[0028] To activate the horn (Figure 1) a driver need only press on the airbag cover 24 and overcome the biasing members 78 such that the first contact 84 touches the second contact 86 (Figure 4). When the driver presses on the airbag cover 24, the clearance C will slightly increase. Although there is normally a clearance C, the clearance C will be eliminated during deployment of the airbag. When the airbag is inflated each armature engagement member 54 will engage each corresponding airbag module engagement member 52 to provide a rigid attachment between the airbag module 22 and the molded armature 32. Therefor, the switch assemblies 26 need not provide airbag module retention during airbag deployment.

[0029] In Figure 6 a disassembly aperture 89 is located through the armature 30 preferably adjacent the 3 o'clock and 9 o'clock armature engagement member 54 (Figure 2A). To provide an additional anti-theft feature, the disassembly apertures 89 may be located relative to the steering column 16 (Figure 1) and under the steering wheel assembly 10 such that the steering wheel assembly 10 must be rotated to a predefined position to access the apertures 89.

[0030] Figure 6A is a sectional view of the steering wheel assembly 10 illustrating a method of disassembly. [0031] A flat bladed disassembly tool 53 is receivable through the disassembly aperture 89 (Figure 6B). The tool 53 is inserted between the armature engagement member 54 and the corresponding airbag module engagement member 52. The tool 53 is then rotated to spread the airbag module engagement member 52 away from the armature engagement member 54. The module 22 is then lifted to assure disengagement of the armature engagement member 54 and corresponding airbag module engagement member 52. The tool 53 can then be inserted into the other disassembly apertures 89 and the process repeated. The airbag module 22 is tilted and lifted away from the molded armature 32 to disassemble the steering wheel assembly 10 in the reverse order of

assembly as described above.

[0031] Another embodiment is shown in Figure 7. The switch assembly 26D includes a first switch portion 130 movable relative to a second switch portion 136 while being biased by a single biasing member 132. By pressing on the airbag cover 24, the first switch portion 130 is moved in the direction of arrow H toward the second switch portion 132. The switch assembly 26D has a switch base 136 having a first conductor such as a metal wire 134 and a second conductor such as a metal wire 135. The first and second metal wires are normally insulated from one another. Upon conductively bridging the first metal wire 134 and the second metal wire 135 an electrical circuit is closed resulting in actuation of the horn. A switch base engagement member 140 secures the switch base to a steering wheel hub and a contour portion 138 extending in an opposite direction from the switch base engagement member.

[0032] The switch base 136 has a contour portion 138 extending from the middle thereof. The contour portion may have openings or slots around the circumference thereof or the contour portion 138 may have a continuous surface. The contour portion 138 has a protrusion 137 that is used to connect the switch base 136 with the switch cap 130. An alignment pin 141 extends from the airbag cover 24. The alignment pin 141 is movable within the alignment aperture 131 in the switch cap and a corresponding passage 149 formed in the switch base. The alignment pin 141 and alignment apertures 131, 140 further assure that the airbag cover is stabilized and pressure thereon will be more directly exerted upon the switch assembly 26D.

[0033] A switch connector 133 has an aperture (150) for receiving the contour portion 138 of the switch base 136. The switch connector 133 has an extension portion 139 that is flexible and can bend so that the extension portion 139 can contact the metal wires. The extension portion 139 is made from a conductive material. In the non-engaged position as seen in Figure 7A, the switch connector rests 133 flat on the switch base 136 and there is a distance separating the extension portion 139 and the metal wires 134, 135. In the engaged position shown in Figure 7B, a protrusion 145 on the switch cap 130 pushes against the extension portion 139 of the switch connector 133 such that the extension portion is depressed so that it contacts the metal wires 134, 135 resulting in current passing from the first metal wire 134 through the switch connector 133 to the second metal wire 135.

[0034] A biasing member 132 preferably a coil spring is disposed between the switch cap 130 and the switch connector 133. The switch cap 130 is connected to the airbag cover 24. The biasing member 132 has a spring force associated therewith to maintain a separation between the switch cap 130 and the switch connector 133. A force applied on the airbag cover will cause the switch cap 130 to slide into the switch connector 133, and the end portion of the switch connector 133 will in

turn bend toward the switch base 136 to close the electrical circuit. In Figure 7B the switch assembly 26D is in its engaged position whereby the horn is actuated.

5 Claims

1. A switch assembly (26D) comprising:

- 10 a switch cap (130) engageable with an airbag cover (24);
 - 15 a switch connector (133) having an extension portion (139) made from an electrically conductive material;
 - 20 a switch base (136) having a switch base engagement member (140) for securing the switch base to a steering wheel hub (12) and a contour portion (138) extending in an opposite direction from the switch base engagement member, the switch base has a first conductor (134) insulated from a second conductor (135);
 - 25 and
 - a biasing member (132) to bias the switch cap (130) from the switch connector (133) wherein the biasing member is disposed between the switch cap and the switch connector.
- 2. A switch assembly (26D) according to claim 1 wherein the switch cap (130) has an aperture (131) for receiving the contour portion (138) of the switch base (136), the switch connector (133) has an aperture (150) for receiving the contour portion of the switch base.
 - 35 3. A switch assembly (26D) according to claim 1 or 2 wherein the extension portion (133) of the switch connector (133) is capable of bending in a direction towards the switch base (136).
 - 40 4. A switch assembly (26D) according to any of claims 1 - 3 wherein the biasing member (132) is a coil spring.
 - 5. A switch assembly (26D) according to any of claims 1 - 4 wherein the first conductor (134) and the second conductor (135) are wires.
 - 45 6. A switch assembly (26D) according to any of claims 1 - 5 in combination with an airbag cover (24) wherein an alignment pin (141) extends from the airbag cover, the alignment pin being movable within an alignment aperture (131) in the switch cap (130) and a corresponding passage (149) formed in the switch base (136).
 - 50 7. A switch assembly (26D) according to any of claims 1 - 7 wherein a force applied on the airbag cover (24) will cause the switch cap (130) to slide into the

switch connector (133), and an end portion of the switch connector (133) will in turn bend toward the switch base (136) to close an electrical circuit.

8. A switch assembly (26D) according to any of claims 1 - 7 in combination with a steering wheel hub (12) secures the switch base engagement member (140) securing the switch base (136) to the steering wheel hub. 5

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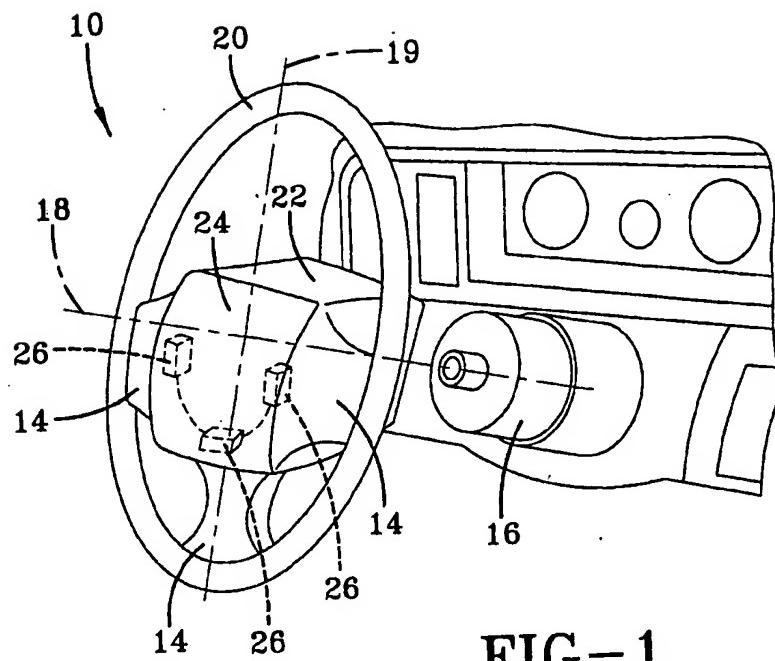


FIG-1

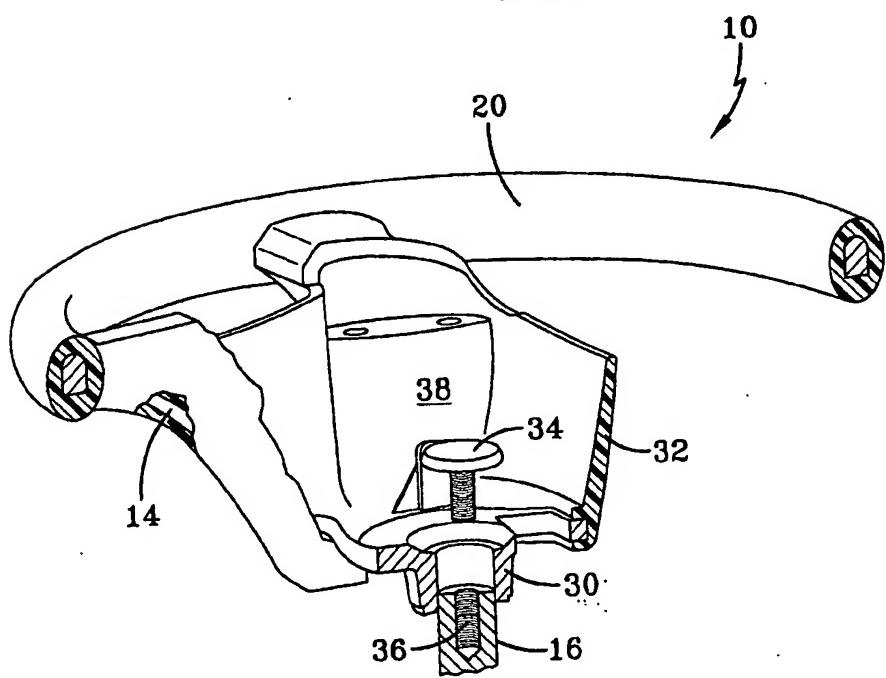


FIG-2

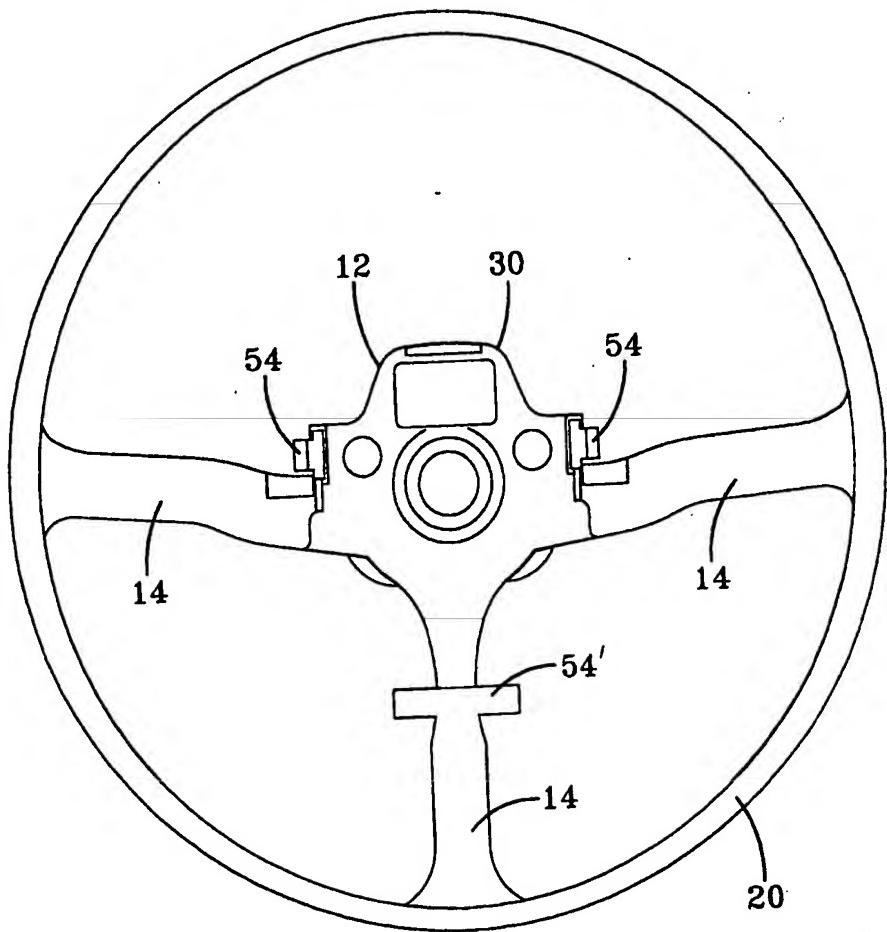
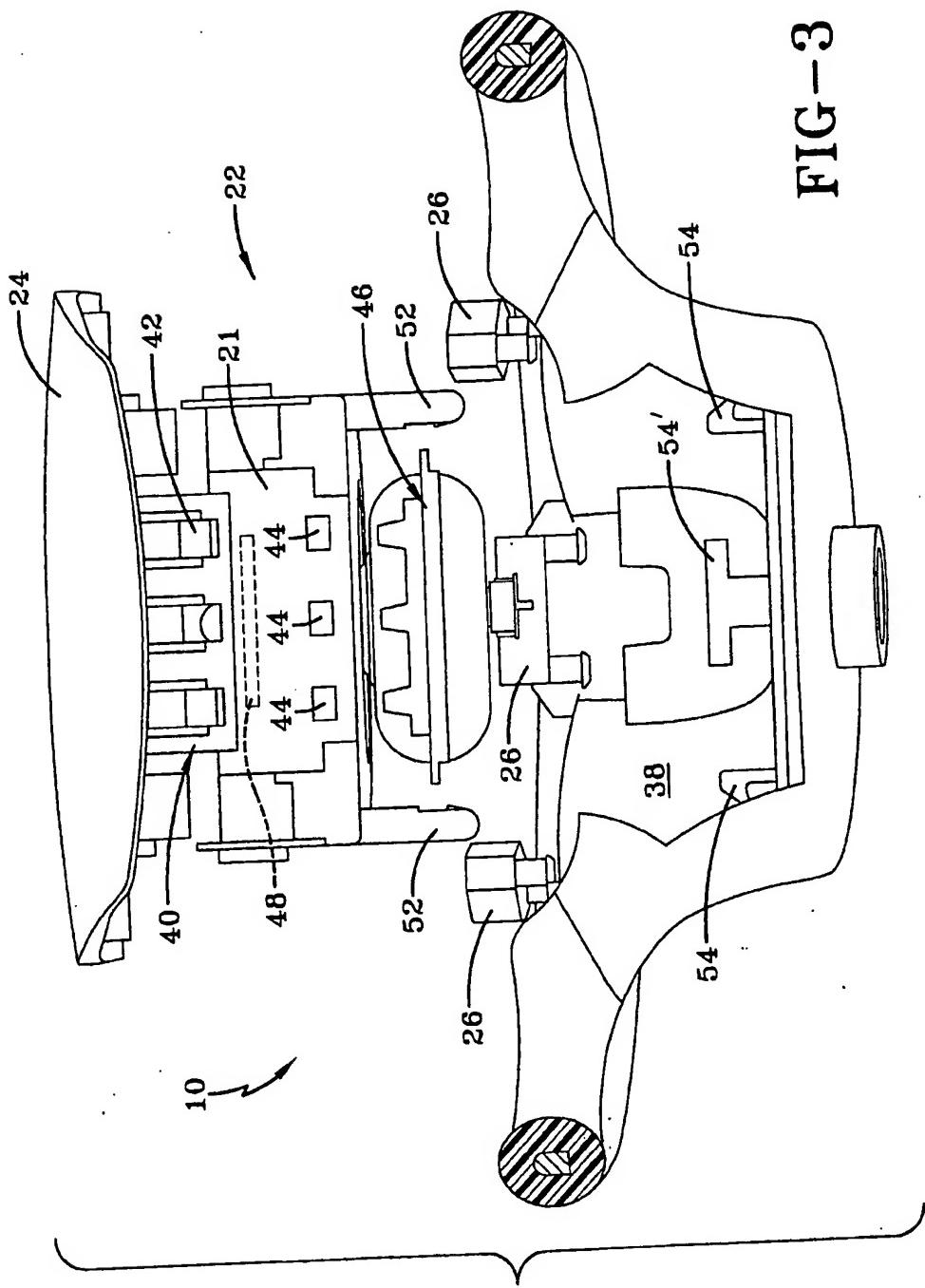


FIG-2A

FIG-3



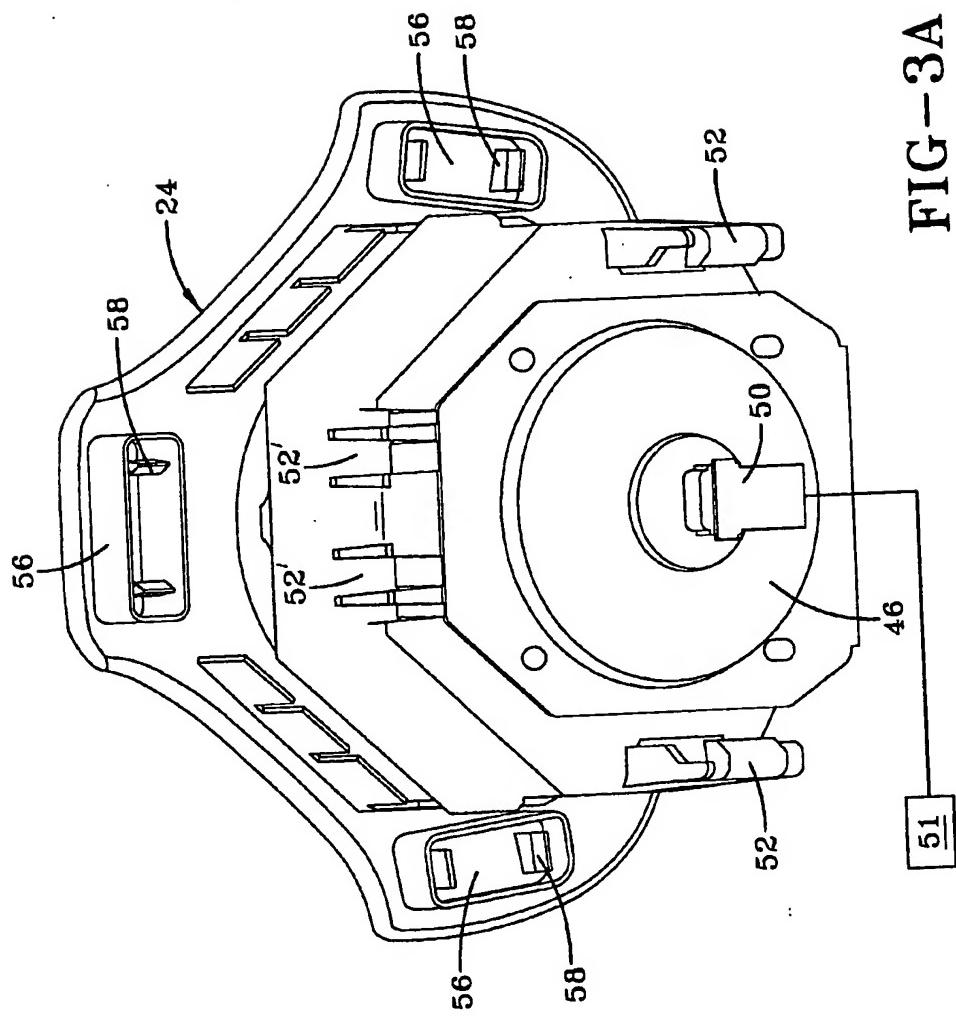


FIG-3A

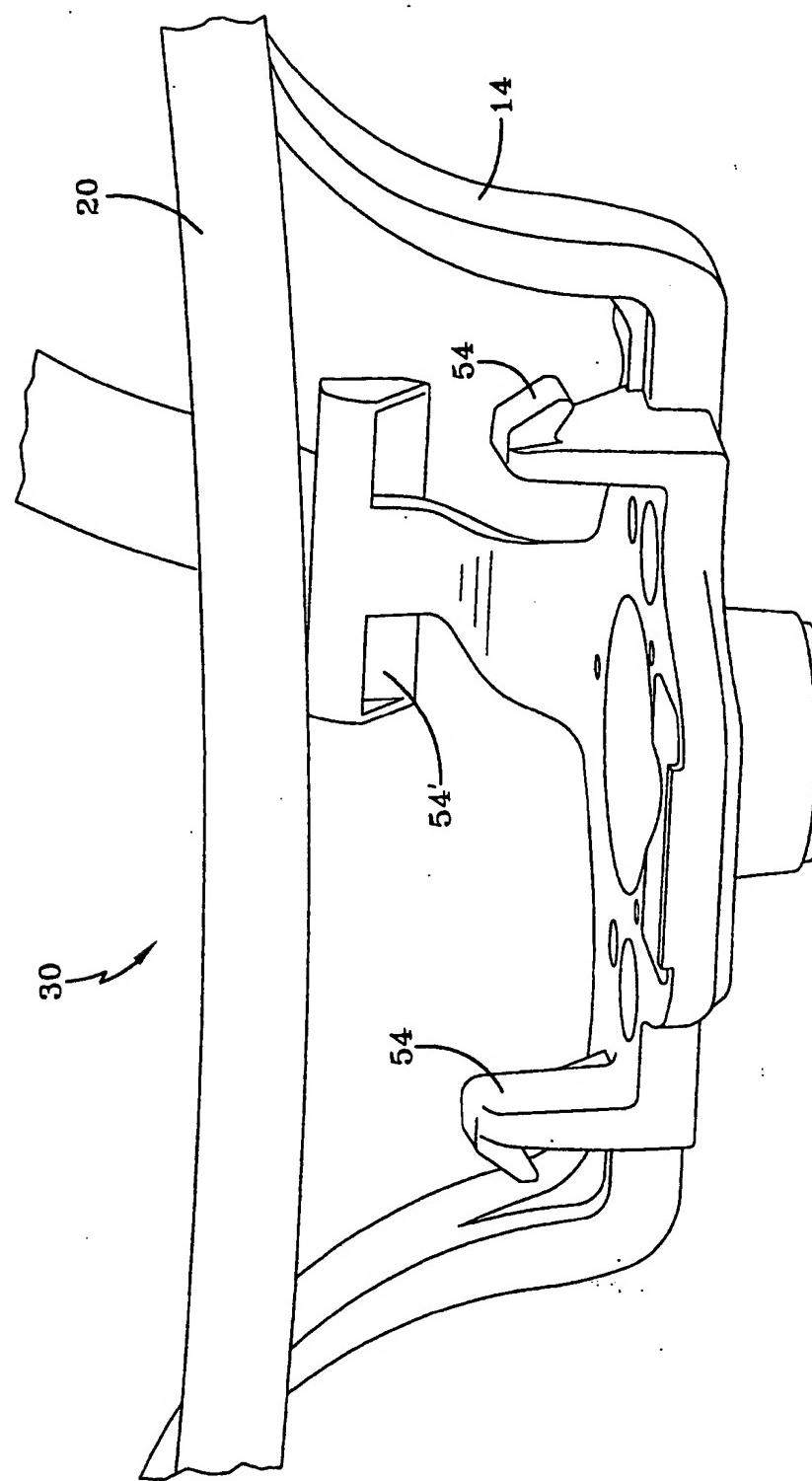
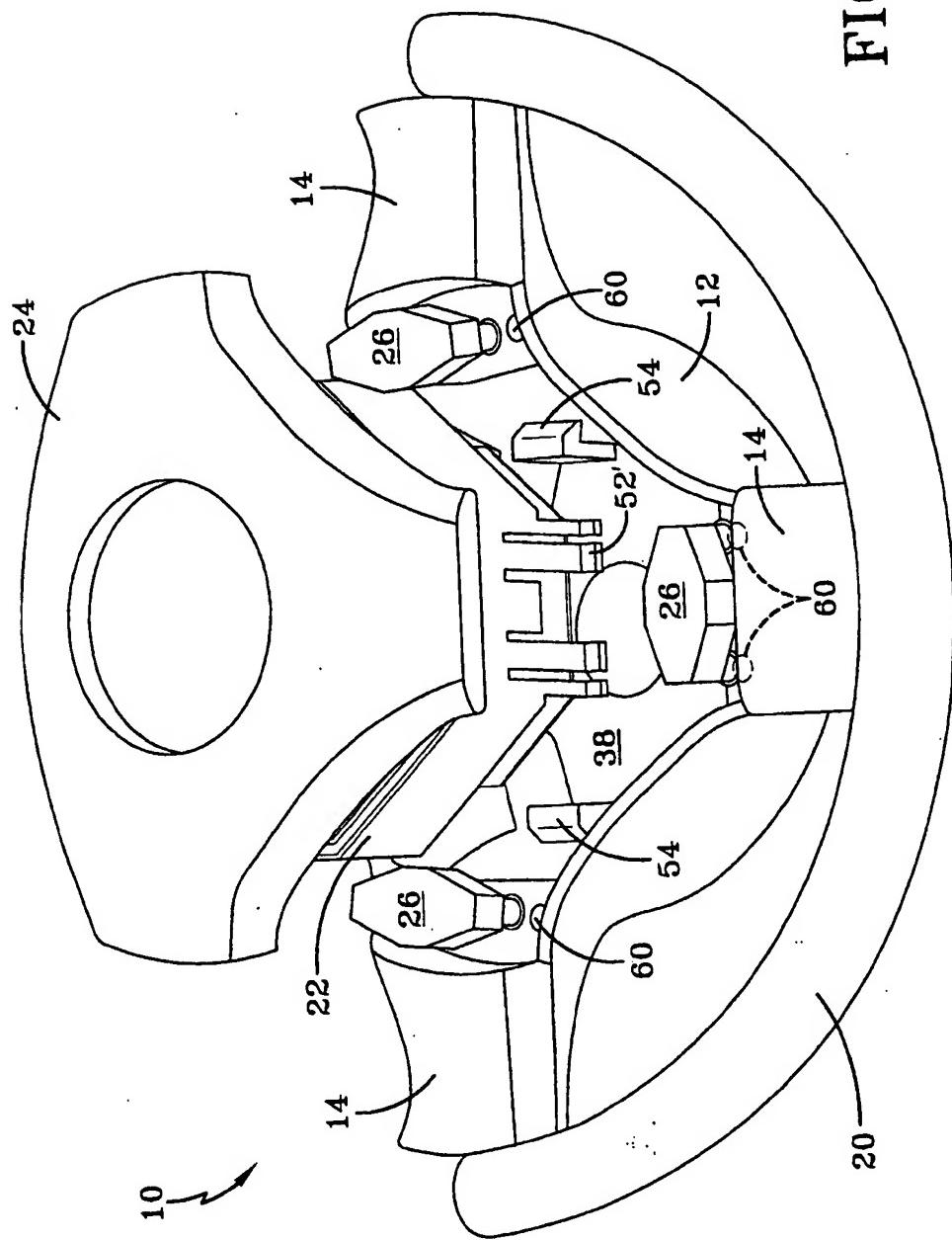


FIG - 3B

FIG-3C



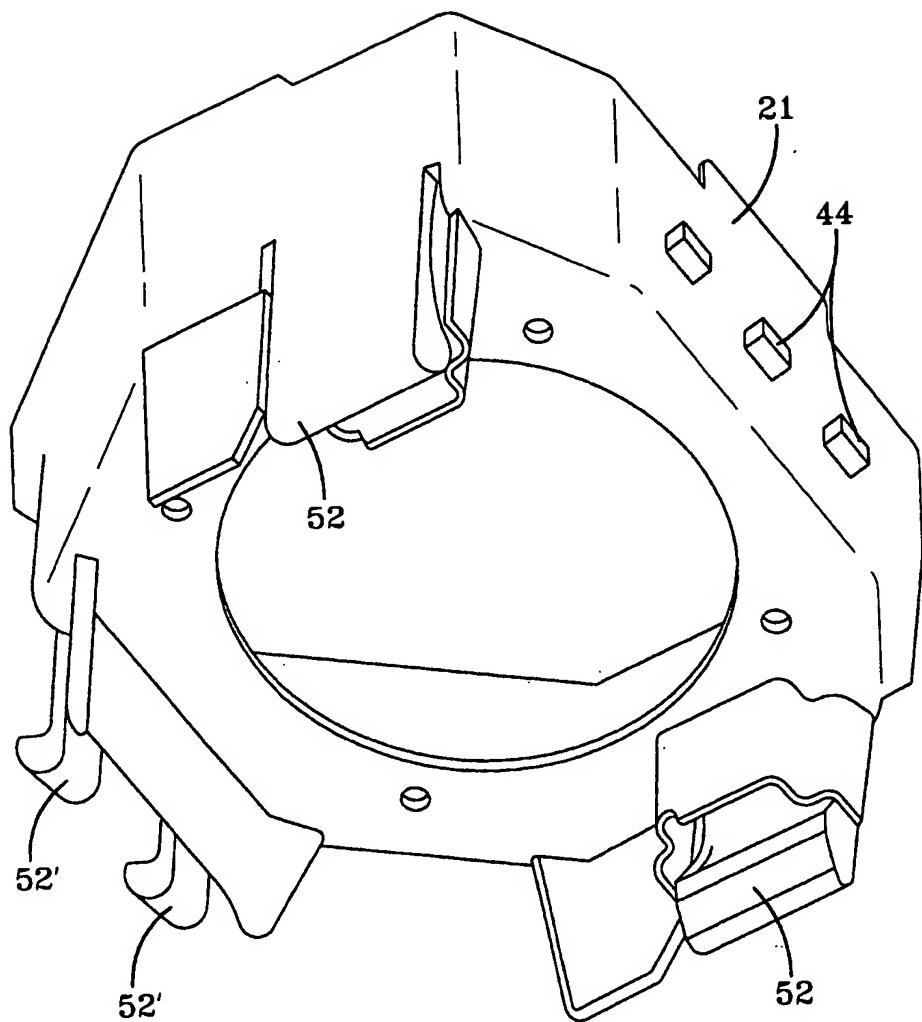


FIG-3D

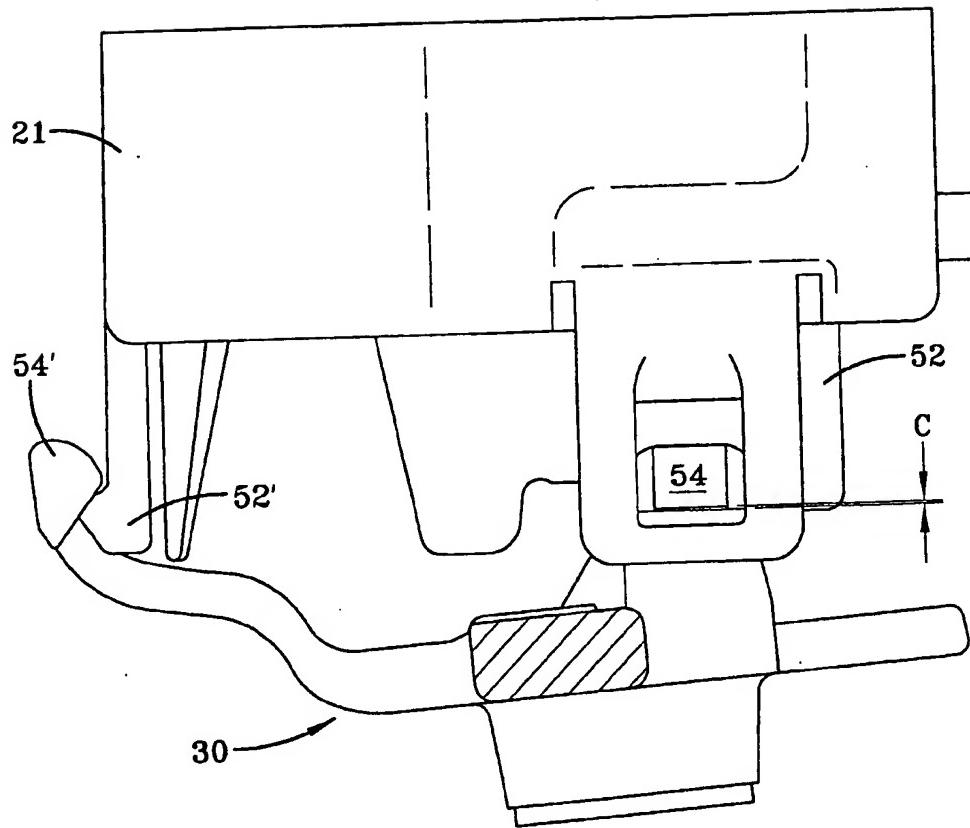


FIG-3E

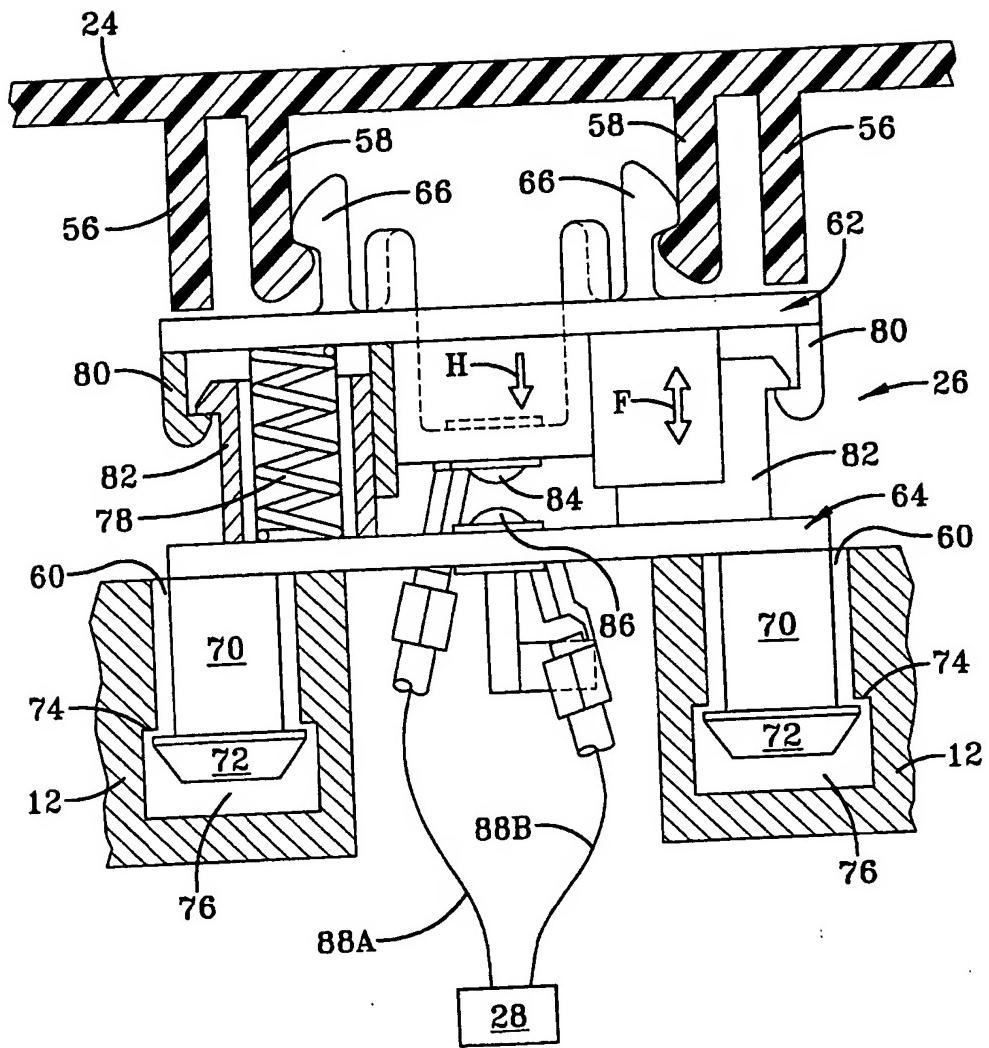


FIG-4

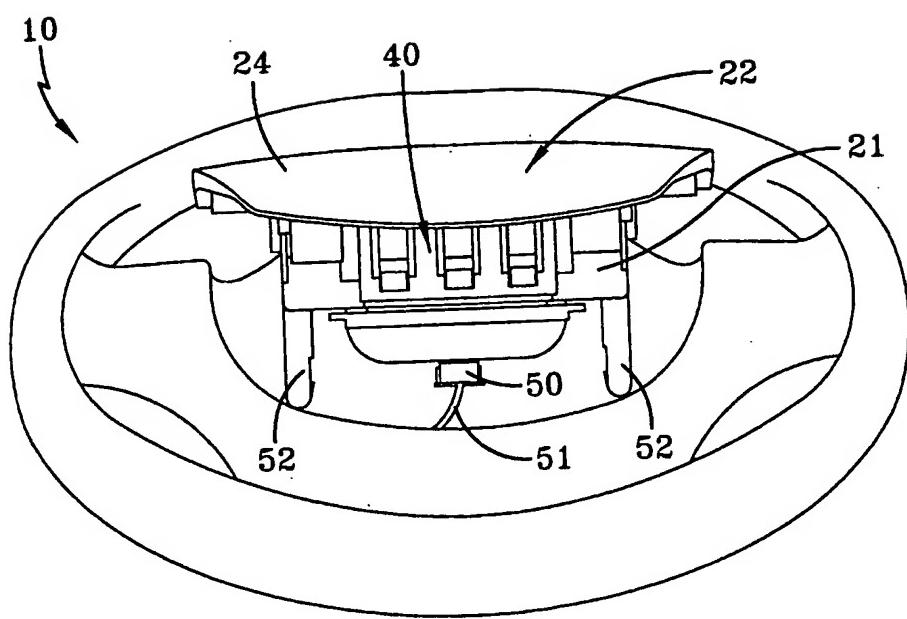
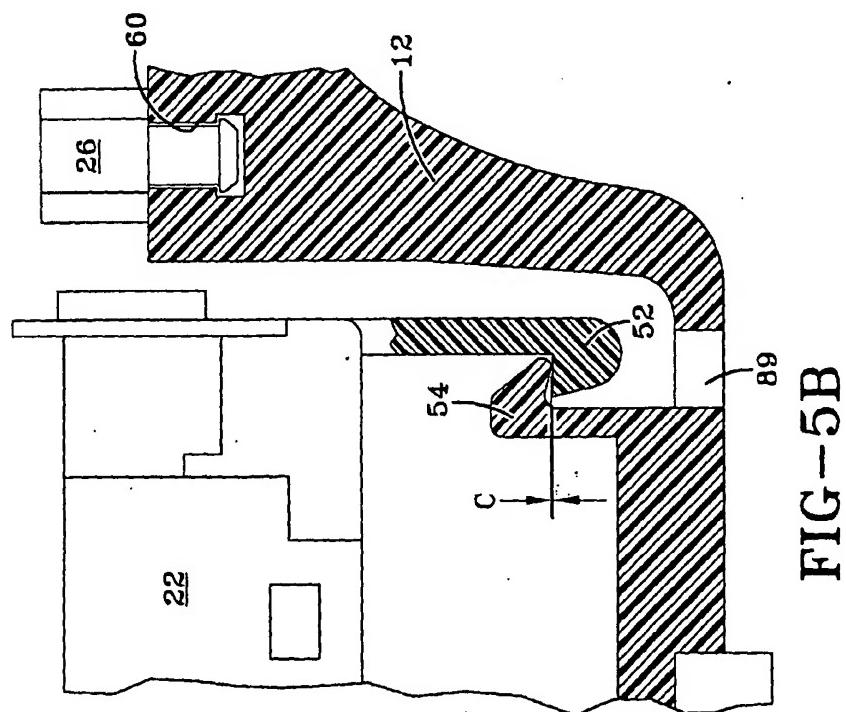
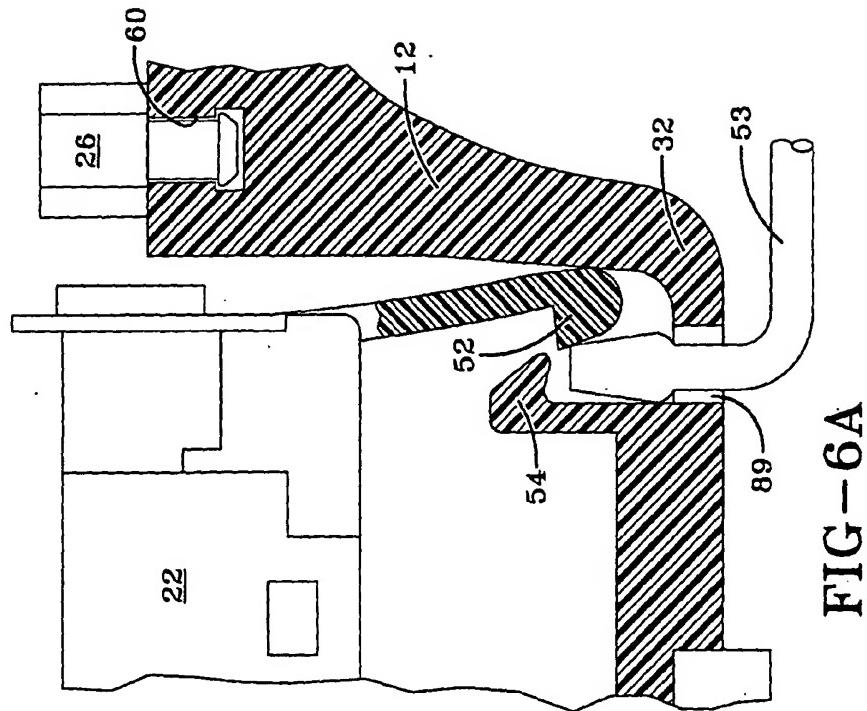
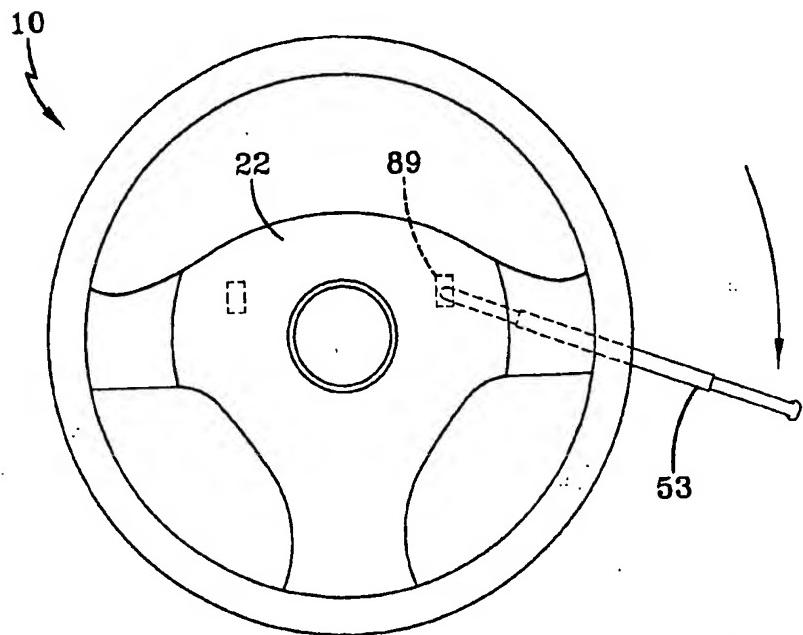
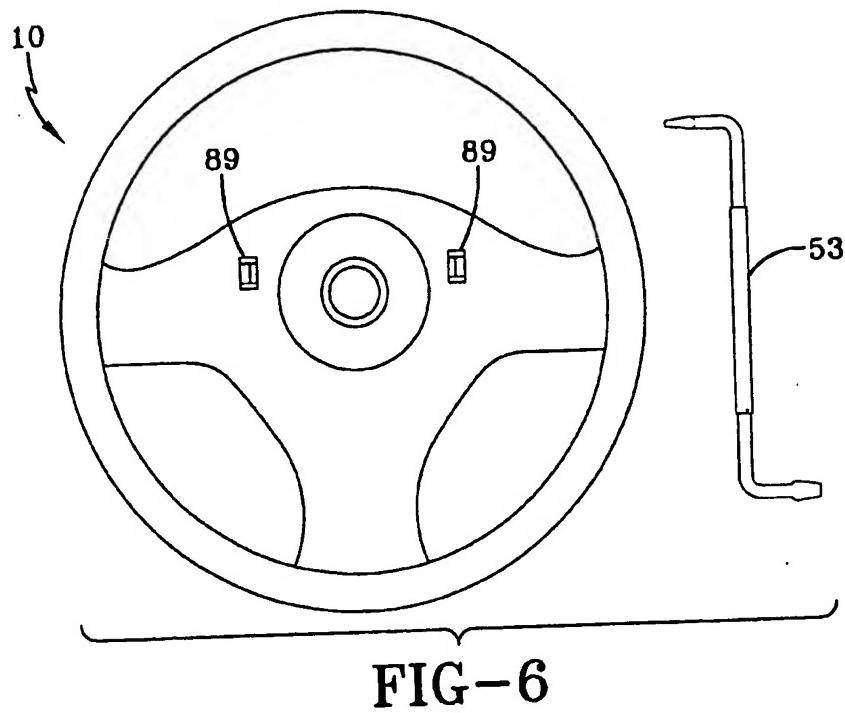


FIG-5A





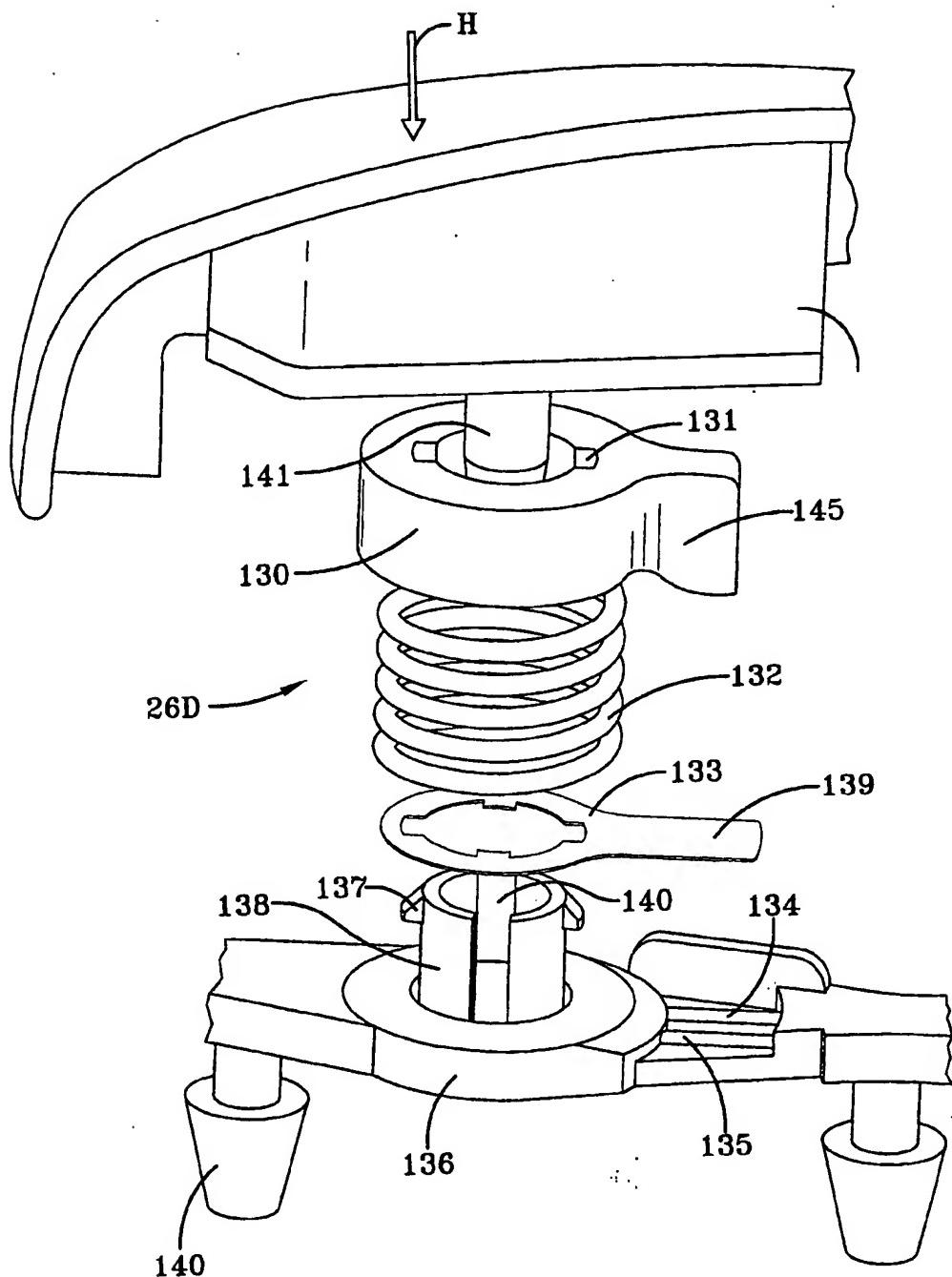


FIG-7

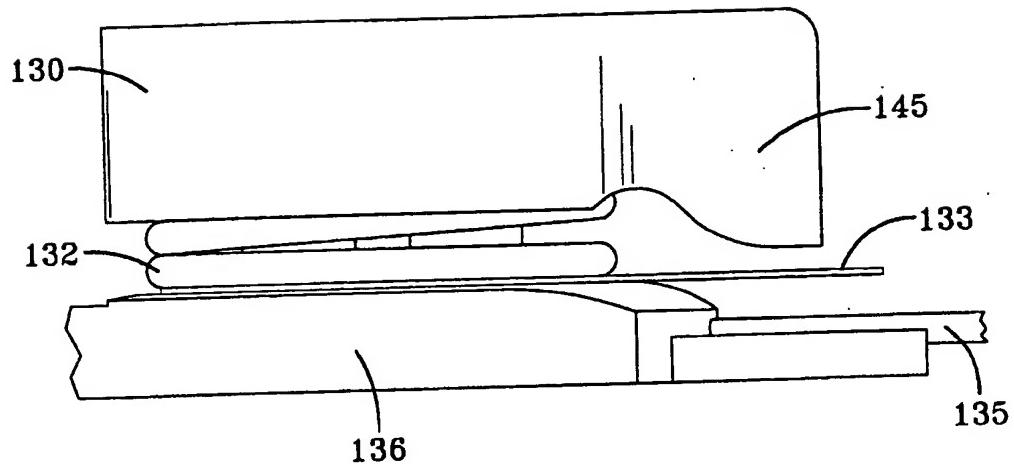


FIG-7A

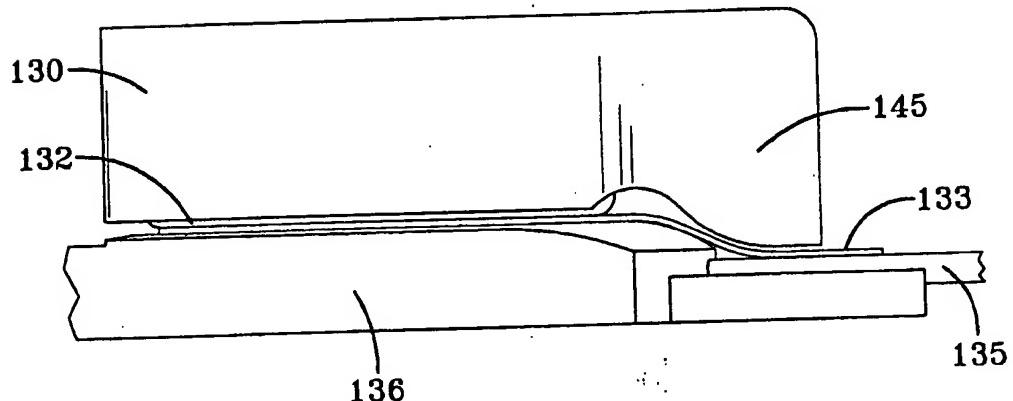


FIG-7B